

Interview with John Wood

(text and interview conducted by Natasha Christia, published in Eyemazing 03/07)

Imagination, the longing of a life to be, the bursting of stories that were never meant to unfold in the places we inhabit and in the paths we cross... Our lives are a journey in time, as are photographs and our act looking at them. As if they were whispers, photographic threads lead us to unknown territories of human history. Deeply affected by the recent loss of his mother, Roland Barthes described the photographic lens as the safe-keeper of a mutilated nostalgia. Yet, time heals wounds; scars become testimonies of gained beauty and out of traumatic remembrances of "dead" moments, old photographs emerge as documents of flesh and spirit. Viewed as an awakening of life, photography takes on a new force, transforming death and disease into life and revealing the world as the corpse of constant mutations.

In a wonderfully composed recollection of clinical photography, poetry and science, "Endurance and Suffering. Narratives of Disease in the 19th century" offers the best example of how photography regains a distinctly plastic and emotive value with the passage of time. Edited in four versions by Edition Galerie Vevais, the book goes beyond any traditional formulae of photopoetry. Distinguished price-winner, poet and photographic critic John Wood has produced a moving series of poems of astonishing sweetness, elegance and candour. His poems draw their inspiration from the first clinical testimonies of venereal diseases conducted during the 1870s-1880s by Dr. George Henry Fox, one of the most important American pioneers in dermatology, with the assistance of: medical photographer O. G. Mason.

Elephantiasis, syphilis and leprosy. Suffering and endurance at the sight of imminent death alongside photography in its first steps. It would be easy to close your eyes and deny the horrifying sensation these images provoked at the moment of their creation. Yet, the passage of time works better for photographs than for ghosts. Feel the flesh and blood behind these skins, "lift their veil" and recognize the person behind the anonymous body. In a revisionist attitude towards any established notions of suffering and sorrow, hatred and beauty, life and eternity, the book challenges us to confront an indulging unknown humanity wrapped among broken limbs, grafted breasts and failing flesh. Eyemazing has shared some thoughts on photography as such an embrace of life, on poetry and on humanism with John Wood, the creative force behind this groundbreaking work.

Natasha Christia: Endurance and Suffering. Narratives of Disease in the 19th Century works as a boiler of contradictions. Poems of beauty are dedicated to subjects which are far from beautiful, science becomes mystified and poetry invades photographic images. Is this the way you describe this new "disease narrative" the book wishes to establish?

John Wood: Actually, you have probably put it better than I can: a poetic remake of scientific materials; a boiler of contradictions; beautiful language dedicated to bodies most people would find horrific; and stories about real people that never really happened. I like the fact that you said I mystified science. I wanted to take these clinical photographs and case studies and infuse them with the humanity the lives of these people deserved. None of them could have had easy lives—especially the poor girl with

Elephantiasis. What could it have been like living in that body? That's what I wanted to know—not the science of her life but its mystery. We look at her distorted body and want to turn away in revulsion, but after looking at her and thinking about her for months and months, I think I realized some of that mystery - that she was beautiful, that she was a part of the eternal woman, and that we should not turn away but should embrace her. So I suppose I would say that this is a book of embraces...

NC: Taking up this notion of embraces, poems such as "Elephantiasis" - which seems dedicated to a prehistoric Goddess of fertility - strike us with their revisionist view. Rather than deformed, their protagonists are naturally shaped human beings that deserve not just our compassion but even our passion!

JW: That is exactly what I was trying to suggest. She is Gaia, our living, breathing planet, the Earth Mother, Earth Wife, and Earth Daughter, and if we look more deeply into others, even those who might repel us because of the way they look—or vote, have sex, pray or not pray—I think we might see similar miraculous transformations.

NC: If beauty is under constant transformation, to what ideal of beauty are we led to nowadays?

JW: The beauty we are led to today, I fear, comes primarily from the look of movie stars. That's what the last chapter of Umberto Eco's *History of Beauty* is about, "The Beauty of the Media," the last section of which is frighteningly entitled "The Beauty of Consumption." Americans are probably the worst. I think we have the narrowest and most restricted sense of beauty, of what makes a beautiful face or a beautiful body. And it's not just American women that have become addicted to being surgically altered; it's becoming popular with men, too. Those who most mistrust and fear individuality are those who most want to look just like everyone else. This book is, by the way, a good example of what I'm talking about. My books of poetry have sold well and so have my critical books on photography, but no American publisher would touch this book. One publishing house well-known for the strong sexual and violent content of their books said it is "too hard-edged for our readership." It is as if we are allowed to be offensive towards anything except society's stereotypical notions of beauty.

NC: You have worked as a poet and photography critic for over two decades, so, should I suppose that you see a link between poetry and photography? Does the ambiguity of the image find its best partner in the openness of the poetic text?

JW: That's a wonderful question. I could talk for hours about being both a poet and a photographic historian. As a poet I would say "yes, of course"; but as a photohistorian I'd say "no, of course not." An artist sees the possibility of anything being appropriated for his or her purposes and turned into art, but the scholar has to respect the original context of the work, why it was made, what it was about. The artist needs only to indulge and delight in that ambiguity you speak of, while the scholar needs to explain it. In other words, this is my schizophrenic book. I let the pictures themselves dictate the style. The little boy with leprosy seemed to call for a form similar to what Blake used in his *Songs of Innocence*; the beautiful girl with scabies covering her breasts suggested English Renaissance poetry and its forms; the man with

horns coming out of his mouth demanded the free verse of a furious 19th century American preacher. The individuals made the choices for me, and it's the most stylistically mixed of any of my books of poetry.

NC: How did your encounter with O. G. Mason and George Henry Fox happen, and how was the idea for the project born?

JW: As a photographic historian, I'd long known their work but really couldn't stand to look at it. However, two of the photographs haunted me—the girl with elephantiasis and the man with syphilis who has his hand on his forehead in a look of desperation. I'd find myself thinking about them or sometimes going back to look at them just as I might go back to look at any other great image. And eventually a poem began to shape itself about her, and then one about him. Then the little boy with leprosy. Eventually over time I knew all these people and I began to imagine their lives. As I say in the Introduction, all of the poems are certainly not about the nobility of suffering. Some are filled with hatred and cruelty because suffering just as often brings out the worst in us as it does the best.

NC: Your work allows for a novel approach to the early history of the photographic medium, pointing out to us there is still much more to discover.

JW: Oh yes, you are so right. New discoveries are occurring all the time. It is a history that has not yet been written. And to some extent that has always been my passion, though my books of the last decade have all been devoted to contemporary photographers—González Palma, Witkin, Saudek, Garduño, Hosoe, Deruytter, ParkeHarrison, and others; but earlier I did four books on the daguerreotype, a book on the autochrome, and a book on a mixture of early processes.

NC: What makes a great photographic image: the way it is or the way we choose to look at it?

JW: That's a very tough question. It's easier to say what can't make a great photo. A photographer can have the most extraordinary craft and technique, but * can fail to make great art. The most perfect of subjects or scenes can be bungled if the photographer doesn't have the craft to reveal it. Then there is that aspect of *je ne sais quoi*—maybe it's Vision, sometimes it's certainly luck, occasionally it's an accident—or so several great photographers have told me—and sometimes it's simply us, the *Zeitgeist*, the moment, a confluence of destinies.

NC: You have contributed to a novel photography criticism based on the openness of the photographic image and its fusion with other genres. Is this precisely what contemporary photography criticism still lacks today?

JW: It would be nice to flatter myself and say, "Oh yes," but in truth there's a lot of extremely fine and diverse writing about photography today, and some of the best of it doesn't even come from people with a photographic background but from novelists, poets, philosophers, and social critics. Photography is the great visual art of our time. In some form or another it is omnipresent in the lives of almost everyone, and so anyone who has thought about culture, ideas, or art can bring their varied backgrounds to the subject of photographs and photography and say interesting and insightful things.

NC: Coming back to the book: From the poems it is more than evident that you developed a very intimate imaginative relationship with every image...JW: Thank you; I do hope I've developed an intimacy with them. Apart from those images I've already mentioned, the one that most haunts me is Onychia, that black hand holding that black bar with a rag around it and resting on top of that box. It is simply an astounding photograph, a great photograph. If one disengages it from the discourse of disease and medicine, it is simply one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of surreal photographs. It is in a class like that of Atget's image of all the people looking up into the sky.

NC: How would you describe Endurance and Suffering in a few words?

JW: My good friend John Stauffer, one of Harvard's great scholars, says "History is the activist's muse." This is precisely what this little book of histories is: a work of protest. It begs us not to forget these lives because they might appear ugly to us, and it protests against limited, constricting notions of beauty...